"Brand-building website design for independent hotels: a replicated model"

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Brand-building website design for independent hotels: a replicated model

Abstract

This paper aims to explore the opportunities that online marketing has to offer and contribute towards small independent hotels in view of the recent decline in hotel brand loyalty. This decline has been fuelled by consumer trends for 'getting their money's worth' and the ability for the small or medium-sized hospitality establishments to reach consumers via Web Based Marketing Strategies. This has narrowed the competition gap with larger international hotel chains considerably. The paper includes a study which identifies the features of hotel websites that are essential to the building and structure of an effective hotel website. The six key elements identified in this paper are accessibility, information, credibility, e-commerce, customer relationship and immediacy. The reliability and validity of this six-element framework as a reflection of user requirements was 'derived' and established using empirical data from a survey. These six elements are established factors in granting online customer satisfaction and gaining customer loyalty.

An important or crucial sector covered by this study is the Guest User Interface (GUI) of websites (accessibility). It has proven to be evident that attractive, easy to use or a user friendly interface is vital to keep consumers on the site without navigating them to another site long enough to make decisions. The conclusion of this paper is that independent hotels must leverage this opportunity by establishing a strong Web presence and capitalize on other sideline recommendations which include collaborations with third-party booking sites (such as Hotels.com) and developing informative, feature-rich websites of their own.

Keywords: branding, hotels, websites, replicated model.

Introduction

The Web has become the most significant phenomenon to affect the marketing and economics of the global hospitality industry. It is revolutionizing the hospitality industry through its various perspectives and capacities. As well as the advertising, promotion, distribution of hospitality products, it also offers an opportunity for small or medium-scaled industries to participate in the global marketplace. It has had a more profound impact on hotel marketing and has forced hotel marketers to rethink their marketing strategies (Au, 2009). By using e-commerce functionality, companies can convert Web interest into bottom-line businesses. With its potential to cut out intermediaries in the supply chain, the Web not only affects the way that tourism and hospitality businesses reach their customers, but also the way that customers locate hospitality products. Over the past decade, an increase in volume pertaining to the hospitality industry over the Internet has been 'observed'. This increase is expanding in extensive proportions initiating this study, which seeks to understand the shrinking gap in competitiveness between large and small hospitality establishments. Large-scale advertising and promotions that were only possible with huge funding or budgets have become outdated. With the advent of web based marketing, even the smallest of hospitality establishments can be competitive and to be on a par with the bigger factions. It has been noted that

when a consumers decide on a purchase, they are less and less concerned with brand loyalty and more interested in perceived value, due to the saturated availability of products and services. With customer reviews and full amenities information at their disposal, consumers looking to book accommodation are able to carefully consider their options before booking, rather than simply sticking with the brands that they have been satisfied with in the past. This presents a significant opportunity for small independent hotels seeking to attract international businesses and place themselves at an advantage, as they are no longer competing with the type of brand loyalty that they found so difficult to penetrate in the past. The 'value for money' nature of current consumers and Web Based marketing opportunities is the tour de force of marketing for all products and services as the playing field is almost even, square and fair.

1. Literature review

This section presents complete review of the existing literature on the vital factors of strategic web development, design and interface required to enhance the vantage point of small or medium-scaled hospitality establishments in the current downturn of brand loyalty. This paper delivers a comprehensive theoretical base for the development of the research. Focusing on the elements of e-marketing from six key perspectives and their theoretical effects in comparison with actual current small hospitality establishments in operation, this paper seeks to address the crucial significance of having a strong web presence.

1.1. Web presence versus brand loyalty. Many hospitality businesses have prioritized the development of a Web presence as a strategic business objective. The vast majority of hotels have already established themselves on the Web, either through their own websites or via a link from a third-party site, such as Orbitz or Kayak. International hotel chains have spent thousands of dollars developing their websites in order to promote their brands online. However, the shift in 'consumer buying decisions' away from brand loyalty is now depleting the advantage that larger, well-known hotel brands once enjoyed (for the purposes of this study, small hotels are defined as independent and multiple-independent hotel operators who do not have a presence in major cities around the world). These independent establishments can now leverage social media marketing and project effective websites in order to take advantage of the opportunities to win over customers based on their actual customer service and amenities rather than blind brand loyalty.

An important factor both for larger hotels looking to maintain their customer base and for independent hotels hoping to earn the business of formerly brand-loyal customers is the development of a strong website. The addition of helpful maps, detailed photographs/videos of the facilities, and information about local events/attractions can help hotels establish a strong Web presence and successfully win more business (Burns, 2010).

1.2. Practical application based on case study. This paper includes an exploration of the opportunities on the Web for (small) independent hotels and a discussion of how they can overcome the inherent difficulties of trying effectively conduct marketing on the Web, as exemplified by a case study about the websites of two hotels in Egypt. The paper proposes an adaptation of the Dutta et al. (1997) marketspace model as a diagnostic tool in the evaluation of hotel websites. In the adapted marketspace model, a set of key design criteria for a hospitality brand-building website and a comparative analysis of a strongly branded and a weakly branded website are 'measured' in terms of objectively met goals. This paper also conclusively highlights the factors to be considered in the feasibility of small independent hotels in being able to compete via the Web. The potential for business growth in developing their brand online is crucial if not essential for small or medium scale establishments to sustain themselves. Two essential factors as to why a strong Web presence is crucial are:

♦ to convert Web interests into bookings, in order to positively influence bottom-line business;

♦ to develop customer relationships and loyalty in the hope that this will lead to repeat business.

To enhance this window of opportunity, a Web presence should be 'enforced' with a proper user interface between the surfing consumer and the Web page. The page should also be attractive to the user and avoid looking lacklustre. Image congruency between the product and endorser evokes the consumer bonding levels (Moore, Keller and Zemanek, 2011).

1.3. E-commerce marketing. There is no doubt that the emergence of the Web has led many international hotel companies to develop the global promotion of their brands even more intensively. International hotel chains around the world spend huge sums of money to promote and support their brands by ensuring that they deliver consistent messages. The Web has become an integral part of the marketing mix in building such brands. Through successful marketing programs, some companies have been able to acquire loyal customer bases willing to seek them out and buy their brands online.

However, a recent decrease in hotel brand loyalty is certainly a promising sign for the independent hotels that are being 'forced' to compete against the previously impenetrable brand recognition established by the larger global hotel chains. Initially, smaller hotels were 'suppressed' by the impressive websites and branding features that the larger companies could afford; however, new studies indicate that hotel brand loyalty is swiftly on the decline (Noel, 2010). According to a 2011 survey conducted by Trip Advisor, only 39 percent of travellers indicated that they were faithful to one specific hotel brand, a figure that had dropped from 59 percent from the previous year. This steep decline in hotel brand loyalty is believed to be the result of the wealth of information that is now available to consumers online (Buchanan, 2012). Rather than sticking to a favorite hotel chain that they have enjoyed in the past, consumers use social media sites and third party booking websites to review customer review ratings and compare amenities in order to determine the best value in terms of their own needs for each hotel stay.

Because consumers no longer are more 'strongly influenced' by brand recognition, independent hotels are presented with greater opportunities for marketing to consumers. In doing so, it is essential that they develop a strong online presence so that they can present their case for why they are the best value and, as a result, win the business of consumers. Building an effective website is a key component of this strategy. Successful website design can demonstrate the amenities and values that the hotel has to offer in comparison to its

competitors and to help avoid any negative impact generated because of start-up problems, including technical failures, customer service flaws, and distribution issues. The user interface is another vital factor. As mentioned before, it is a factor in drawing and keeping the attention of the potential customer. Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) has existed as a research domain and gained a reputation as one of the core elements in designing online applications (Spais, 2010). The incorporation of SEO functionality into the Web page will also give the institution a head start in capturing consumers in the initial stages of their perusal of the site. The use of SEM and SEO tools is an evolutionary capture and uses of knowledge that influences not only online customers' behavior, but also the mental functioning of the individual and future tool design, in that individuals' creative interaction and increasingly sophisticated technology tools and approaches influence it (Spais, 2010). For the evaluation of a website, a methodology is highly desirable, and the development of this methodology is presented in the next section of this paper.

2. Developing a methodology for the evaluation of hotel websites

Perhaps the simplest and the most effective starting point in evaluating hotel websites would be to return to marketing basics and examine the Web with respect to the '4Ps' (the marketing mix): product, place (distribution), promotion, and price, which characterize the marketplace. The Web, through its functionality, challenges the players in the traditional marketplace by offering lower costs and adding value for consumers, which can transform traditional businesses. The Web has made it possible

for organizations to focus on building relationships with individual customers and to make direct, personalized contact with each customer online (Fletcher and Bahargi, 2000). The term *marketspace* has been used in the marketing industry for over a decade and the Oxford Dictionary defines it as "commerce carried out by electronic means, especially via the Internet" (Oxford, 2012).

Dutta et al. (1997) defined two dimensions of the marketspace model: technological capability and a strategic business dimension, which together reflecting the '4Ps' and '2Cs' ('connectivity' and 'customer') – the relationship between the business and the customer. Connectivity refers to how the Web can get business connected to the consumer to build a customer relationship or brand. Dutta et al. (1997) describes interactivity and connectivity as dual but clearly separate issues, labelling these as Internet/WWW. The separation of the Internet (the hardware) from the Web (the functionality that exists on top of the hardware) is artificial – the interoperability of different information technology (IT) platforms has made the hardware infrastructure transparent to the user and, in user terms, the real issues that distinguish websites relate to interactivity. Thus, interactivity and connectivity can be merged into one entity (interactivity) representing the support environment in which Web marketing occurs. The proposal here is that the market space model requires some refinement before it can become an appropriate tool for the evaluation of hotel websites from a marketing perspective. Dutta et al. (1997) offers a list of features relating to each element of the model. Table 1 lists the different features, identified with each of the elements of Dutta et al.'s model.

Table 1. Hotel website features, based on the marketspace model

Interactivity features	Product features	Price features
Accessibility Downloading time Navigation Flow & design Languages URL address Rank on search engines Updates Graphics Multimedia Reliable hyperlinks Security Search	Basic product information Additional (expanded) product information Online brochure Online help for choosing products Customer participation in new product design Group bookings Destination contents	Price information available online Customer participation in pricing Currency converters
Place (distribution) features	Promotion features	Customer relationship features
Product availability E-mail reservation Online reservation Real time processing of orders Confirmation Online payment Third party booking (DDSs) Credit cards used Privacy and security	Online advertising Downloadable coupons Special packages and offers Frequent guest programs Membership clubs Discounts	Feedback form Online customer service Customer identification (profiling) Customer communities FAQ Mailing lists News letters Direct e-mail Suggestions and/or complains What's new

2.1. Developing consumer focus for the evaluation. Since any system must be 'user-driven' rather than 'technology-driven' or 'content-driven,' it is important to select a shortlist of features from the 48 features in Table 1 which most reflect the user requirements. The author of this paper achieved this by carrying out an online survey of members of the staff at the Open Arab University in Kuwait by sending them an e-mail inviting them to participate in a survey including a demographic section and list of website features identified from literature. This mode of sampling ensures that the respondents are all potential Internet users as, by definition, they have e-mail access. The e-mail contained a link to an online survey in which Web users were asked to rank the importance of each feature on a Likert scale of 1 to 5 (1 = critically important and 5 = not at all important). Responses compiled were 'automatically fit' into a file for analysis in a spreadsheet. The median response was calculated for each of the 48 website design features. Table 2 summarizes the 28 features of website design which achieved a median response of two choices, 1 (critically important) or 2 (very important), i.e. the features which that were most important from a user's perspective.

Relating the 28 user-relevant features to the modified Dutta et al. (1997) marketspace model does little to facilitate a strategic approach to the rationalization of website design. This however, can be achieved by organizing the 28 features within the following six groups of key design criteria: accessibility, information, credibility, e-commerce, customer relationship, and immediacy (see Table 2).

Table 2. Hotel Web design features ranked as "critically important" and "very important" by Web users, grouped by key design characteristics

Features	Accessibility	Information	Credibility	E-commerce	Customer relationship	Immediacy
Accessibility	●					
Downloading time	●					
Navigation	●		●			
URL	●				●	
Updates			●			
Search the site			●			
Destination contents (details)		●				
Price information available online		●				
Product availability		●		●		
Email reservation				●		●
Online reservation				●		●
Real time processing of orders				●		●
Confirmation				●		●
Credit cards accepted				●		
Privacy and security matters				●		
Frequent guest programs					●	
Graphics			●			
Basic product information		●				
Additional product information		●				
Online brochure		●				
Currency converter				●		●
Online advertising		●				
Discounts				●	●	
Feedback form					●	
Online customer service					●	
Frequently asked questions (FAQ)					●	
Mailing lists					●	
Direct e-mail					●	●

In the context of brand building, the key design criteria cannot be considered individually, but rather should be considered as complementary and synergistic factors which reinforce each other. These refinements provide the emphasis needed for the design of a website, which can successfully support brand development (see Table 2). The design criteria are briefly described below.

2.2 Six key design criteria. *2.2.1. Accessibility.* Unless a website is easy to locate and responds to customer searches on the major search engines (e.g. Google), it will be unable to communicate any

information to its audience. The website designer should specify how SEO (Search Engine Optimization) is to be 'utilized' during the development of the website in order to optimize the website's rank on search engines. However, accessibility on its own is not enough. The website must download and open reasonably quickly and earn the attention of the user before he/she navigates to another site. Navigation is also a very important accessibility feature. A website should provide clear and consistent navigation mechanisms – such as orientation information, navigation bars, a site map, etc. – to increase the likelihood that users will be able to find what they are looking for quickly and conveniently.

2.2.2. Information. Perhaps the most important element marketers should keep in mind when deciding on the content of their website is its usefulness to the consumer. Useful information ranges from basic destination contents, e.g. maps, restaurant facilities, local attractions and community events, to detailed information about products and services and their availability and up-to-date price information.

2.2.3. Credibility (reliability). Proper website design is largely a matter of balancing the structure and relationship between a menu on the home page as well as the individual content pages and other 'linked' graphics and documents. The goal is to build a hierarchy of menus and pages that users feel is convenient and well structured, and does not interfere with their use of the website or mislead them. A website should be easy to navigate. Links should carefully be labelled and regularly checked to ensure that they still work (i.e. checked to ensure that they have not become 'dead links'). It is also important to update and revise the content of the site very regularly. The site should never contain old or outdated information that could deter potential customers and provide an opportunity for other hotels to attract and induce revenue on their behalf instead.

2.2.4. Immediacy. If hotels intend to utilize the Web entirely as a marketing tool, they must harness its immediacy. The Web has given rise to continual demands from users for immediacy. Hotel websites must be able to satisfy and fulfill this demand. It is vital that the website should be able to execute online reservations, special instructions, and cancellations promptly. Special instructions may include notes such as special arrangements (e.g. a requirement for an extra bed in the room) or notification that the guest(s) will be arriving late. It is also vital to

identify any problems immediately, e.g. the guest has requested a handicapped-friendly room but none is available.

2.2.5. E-commerce. A website with e-commerce functionality offers the speed and convenience of a one-stop availability check and instant purchase with confirmation. It should enable guests to confirm the booking of their rooms in real-time and allow them to close the sale immediately through an online booking agency that is branded to have the same look and feel of the website. A website should be 'customized' to communicate the hotel's specific terms and conditions for reservations, room views, directions for travelling to the hotel, and other crucial information.

2.2.6. Customer relationship. Websites should assist effectively in sustaining a good relationship with customers and proficient in supporting brand building. There are many features which can provide this assistance. For example, hotel websites can contain electronic forms for customer completion and hotels can reply directly via e-mail, or post a series of frequently asked questions (often known as "FAQs"), from which customers might be able to find answers to common queries. In addition, there has been considerable growth of the use of social media as part of online marketing campaigns through social network websites such as Facebook and Twitter. Social media marketing is a cheap and powerful marketing option for any type or size of hotel. Although further discussion of the use of social media is outside the scope of this paper, it is important to develop that the implementation of a social media marketing strategy that is specific to the hospitality industry. The realistic implications such a strategy has when coupled with time/cost effectiveness for the hotel is a key consideration for today's hotel marketers (Hotel Marketing, 2012). The kind of rapport provided by all of these features will improve customer relations and contribute towards the building of customer loyalty.

3. Applying the methodology to the evaluation of two hotel websites

Below are two examples of hotel websites, one strongly developed and the other weak in its structure and its interface. Table 3 shows the results of the comparison and analysis between the two.

Table 3. Results of the analysis of two websites

Features	Marriott.com	Maadi.com
Accessibility		
Accessibility	From all search engines Ranks high on most major search engines	From some search engines Ranks low on major search engines

Table 3 (cont.). Results of the analysis of two websites

Features	Marriott.com	Maadi.com
Downloading time	Very short	Short
Navigation	Very easy to navigate and move between pages	No navigation tools Difficult to navigate in general
URL	Short, easy to remember http://www.marriott.com	Long http://www.maadihotel.com
Information		
Destination contents (details)	✓	✕
Price information available online	✓	✓
Product availability	✓	✕
Basic product information	✓	✓
Additional product information	✓	✕
Online brochure	✓	✕
Currency converter	✓	✕
Online advertising	✓	✕
Credibility		
Navigation	Reliable hyperlinks	Some dead links
Updates	Updated and shows last update	Not updated
Search the site	✓	✕
Graphics	Well used	Misused
E-commerce		
Product availability	✓	✕
E-mail reservation	✓	✕
Online reservation	✓	✕
Real time processing of orders	✓	✕
Confirmation	✓	✕
Credit cards accepted	Details provided	No details provided
Privacy and security matters	Secure online transactions	N/A
Currency converter	✓	✕
Discounts	✓	✕
Customer relationship		
URL	Reflect a brand name	Reflects unknown name
Frequent guest programs	✓	✕
Discounts	✓	✕
Feedback form	✓	✕
Online customer service	✓	✕
Frequently asked questions (FAQ)	✓	✕
Mailing lists	✓	✕
Direct E-mail	✓	✕
Immediacy		
e-mail reservation	✓	✕
Online reservation	✓	✕
Real time processing of orders	Immediate	N/A
Confirmation	Immediate confirmation	N/A
Currency converter	✓	✕
Direct e-mail	Available with very quick response	Available, usually reply comes in 4-5 days time

Note: N/A – not available.

3.1. Marriott.com. Marriott.com represents a very good example of a fully transactional and user-friendly hotel website that projects the 'look and feel' of the Marriott brand. Designed with the convenience of the user in mind, rather than the hotel's ease of functionality, Via Marriott.com users can make hotel reservations and travel plans for nearly 2,000 Marriott international hotels representing 12 different lodging brands. By registering basic profiling information on the website, customers eliminate the need to re-enter personal information when making reservations. It has extensive personalization features, which increase convenience and ease of use. Users can easily navigate the site and take advantage of the express reservations service and benefit from receiving content more closely tailored to their specific interests. Marriott.com

offers personalized web page content and e-mail offers, and site visitors have the option of providing information about their travel habits; e.g. the cities they visit, their favorite activities and preferred Marriott brands. Marriott.com can then deliver content that is 'specially tailored' to the customers' interests. Customers can also choose to receive e-mails about new offers, products and services or search the site for more promotional items and packages.

In addition, reservation functions, payment trans-actions and any information customers provide in their registered profile on the site is 'protected' in a secure environment and can be viewed, changed or deactivated by the customer online at any time.

3.2. Maadihotel.com. This hotel website represents a typical example of basic Web presence, a sort of 'online brochure' which only provides a set of static pages adapted from existing hard-copy marketing material. The site follows a 'slide show' structure and offers few links from the front page to other sections (pages) of the site. Most of the pages only have a color photograph and a brief description of the services or facilities offered by the hotel. In general, the website exhibits weak design and structural features: it has poor use of colors, texts, images and hyperlinks. The site does not offer any real-time interaction, or any function to check room availability. There is no online advertising or any form of discounts or special promotions for Web users.

4. Discussion and implications

The methodology allows websites to be classified according to each of the six criteria that promote brand building and clearly identify the way in which they build their online presence. It was also possible to classify websites into strongly developed websites and weakly developed websites (see Table 4).

Table 4. Comparison between weakly developed and strongly developed hotel websites

Weakly-developed websites (independent hotels)	Strongly-developed websites (international chains)
Non-transactional	Fully transactional
Informational marketing sites	Rich in contents
Non-unique domain name, maybe not a '.com'	Enter via home pages of each of the chains' brands
Does not reflect any brand image	Look and feel the brand concept
Static pages adapted from existing hard-copy marketing material	Consistent messages throughout all pages of the website, in order to draw users to the site
Difficult to update	Easy to update
More like an online brochure, a marketing and PR site	Site integrated with brand marketing message
Stand-alone business	Secure transactions

Overall, the larger hotel chains have generally invested in strongly developed websites that are full of attractive marketing techniques and useful features for customers. In contrast, most of the smaller independent hotels have not developed strong websites, most likely because of the lack of funding that the larger hotels have at their disposal. Although the smaller hotels are not fully leveraging the potential of their online presence by developing feature-rich and attractive websites, they are still providing the basic information necessary to demonstrate their value to customers, such as services provided and amenities available. In addition, the influx of third-party websites, such as Orbitz and Kayak, have provided online booking opportunities for smaller hotels that may not have online booking features established on their own websites. In fact, the amount of hotel bookings that began from generic search engines (such as Google) rather than third-party sites has in steady declined since 2004 (Hotel Marketing, 2012). Nevertheless, there is certainly a noticeable opportunity for independent hotels to improve upon their website designs in order to capitalize on potential customers and earn their business. The promotional techniques employed in these websites are as critical as the website itself. "Promotion techniques shaped the way in which customers acted in all cases" (Spais G., 2011).

Conclusion

In the age when consumers are accessing information via the Web before making buying decisions, hotel marketers must work to ensure that their Web presence is strong and persuasive. Independent hotels can now benefit from a significant decline in hotel brand loyalty exhibited by consumers and take advantage of the opportunity to build their own customer base. Since the recent decline in brand loyalty is the result of the readily available information that consumers are reviewing before making their booking decisions, it is critical for hotels 'to clearly demonstrate' how their facilities are superior to those of their competitors. If they are able to successfully convince consumers that their hotel provides the best value in the area, based on detailed descriptions of their location/nearby attractions, amenities, and customer reviews, they can earn their business without impacting any sense of brand loyalty to the chain hotels nearby.

In order to 'effectively leverage' this opportunity, independent hotels must develop informative, feature-rich websites with effective guest user interfaces (GUI). In addition, they must align successfully with third-party travel websites and promote themselves on those sites as well. With a well-developed, informative website and an effective collaboration with third-party booking sites, independent hotels can successfully compete with global hotel brands.

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